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DEFENSE ISSUES

In a salute to U.S. military veterans, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff discusses foreign policy challenges to America's role as a global power and the demands they place on the restructured U.S. military and its members' morale.

Volume 13 Number 21

Military Veterans Still Pivotal in U.S. Military Issues

Prepared remarks of Gen. Henry H. Shelton, USA, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Conference, Washington, Mar. 2, 1998.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for that wonderful introduction. It's great to be here with you today, because I truly feel that I am among friends. Growing up in North Carolina, I was surrounded by veterans who seemed larger than life to me then, and even as a small boy, I was aware of what they had done for me, for my community and for our country. To each of you, let me say right up front, thank you!

And today I would like to make special mention of the fact that this is the 50th anniversary of the integration of women into the military. I congratulate your female members on another milestone in the ongoing story of women in the military. You laid the groundwork for so many, and today I'm proud to salute your service and accomplishments over the years.

As you probably know, I'm asked to speak to many different groups around the country, but this is truly a group that I look forward to more than any other -- except perhaps the young men and women who followed in your footsteps and who carry on your great work of defending the nation and protecting the Constitution.

They are in every sense your legacy. They carry on your traditions and your standards, and you can be very proud of them.

One of those great young soldiers drives for me, and when I heard that his birthday was coming up, I decided to do something special for him. When the great day arrived and he pulled up to take me to the office, I told him "Get in the back -- today, I'm driving you to work!"

So off we went, and I have to tell you, that big old Cadillac is a lot more fun to drive than to ride in! Well, wouldn't you know it, I got so absorbed in the fun of it all that I forgot how fast I was going, until I saw those red flashing lights in my rear view mirror. A minute later, a young MP [military policeman] walked up, looked inside and turned a sort of ghostly pale.

He thought I couldn't hear him when he went off to talk to his sergeant on his walkie-talkie. "Hey, Sarge," I could hear him saying, "I've got a problem here; I just pulled over someone awful important. What should I do?"

"Well, who is it?" I heard the sergeant say.

"I'm not sure" the young fellow answered "but he must be a real big shot -- he's got the chairman of the Joint Chiefs for a driver!"

Today I would like to tell you about what these great young people are doing around the world, and what we are doing to prepare for the next century.

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I feel a little like a chairman of the board reporting on the state of the company to the stockholders, because in a very real sense, that's exactly what you are. After all, you have made the biggest investment of all in our national security. You gave your youth, your time, your sweat and hard work, and in many cases you gave your blood, to keep us free and strong.

And I have to confess I have a hidden agenda, because to get where we need to be, we're going to need your help. To bring us into the next century and to maintain the kind of military leadership that you passed on to us, we will need your strength and support, your ideas and experience, and your continuing leadership more so than we have in the last 20 years.

I think you are all aware of the deep cuts we have made in this decade -- cuts we needed to make to align our force structure with a new and very different security environment. We reduced our forces and our budgets by about 40 percent, although we still have a ways to go to match our infrastructure with our new force structure -- a point I'll return to later.

But even as we drew down we became much busier. The end of our rivalry with the Soviet Union has left us with a more volatile, complex and uncertain world, and revived many of the ethnic, tribal and religious conflicts that lay dormant during the Cold War. In Iraq and Somalia, in Haiti and Rwanda, in Bosnia and Macedonia, we have seen the face of the future reflected in the bitter divisions of the past. And in the Far East and Southwest Asia, we keep strong and ready forces to deter rogue states with chemical and biological weapons and the means to deliver them.

In the past four years we conducted some four dozen major operations, and today, in support of our national strategy, we have more than 50,000 troops deployed in 12 major operations and many other smaller ones, in dozens of countries around the world. In Bosnia we are approaching a new phase in NATO's ongoing mission to maintain stability in that troubled region. Our troops in Bosnia have done extraordinarily well, and the progress they've helped us achieve will enable us to significantly reduce our presence there this summer.

However, I do not anticipate our complete withdrawal from the Balkans in the near future for a very good reason. Along with our NATO partners, we have much at stake, because preventing another outbreak of civil war is critical to the stability of the region and a major test for NATO in this new era. Although the military tasks outlined in the Dayton Accords have been accomplished, there is a continuing need to provide a safe and secure environment so that the political and economic tasks can be accomplished successfully. Our participation in Bosnia goes hand in hand with our leadership of NATO, our strongest and most important alliance.

And NATO is now embarking on a new and exciting phase as it adapts itself for the future. Last summer, the North Atlantic Council voted to admit three new members: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. All three nations have played important roles in supporting NATO in Bosnia, all three supported us in the Gulf War, all three have worked hard to meet NATO guidelines for membership and all three offered their support in the ongoing situation with Iraq.

When you look at the history of Europe in this century, a history many of you experienced firsthand, you realize that an investment in stability now is far better than paying for the alternative -- war and destruction -- down the road. That is really the essence of our current strategy, to shape the international environment with our military, diplomatic and economic strength to prevent conflicts from escalating and getting out of hand. If necessary, we are always ready to respond with military force up to and including two major theater wars -- a capability which, in my view, makes us the pre-eminent military power we are. Other nations can be important regional powers, but only the United States is a truly global power.

And that ability to project our military power anywhere in the world in overwhelming strength is crucial, not only to our security and prosperity, but also to the peace and stability of the entire world. But as I'm sure you appreciate, staying as busy as we are affects our readiness, an area we are working very hard to maintain.

At the strategic level we are in fairly good shape, as I just told the Senate Armed Services Committee last week. We are ready to execute the National Security Strategy, and I say that with all confidence. At the tactical level, where the rubber meets the road, we have some concerns in areas like pilot retention and infantry recruiting. With a booming economy, enlistments are beginning to show signs of falling off and recruiting is more of a challenge. Our units in the field, and more to the point, our men and women in uniform and their families are challenged to keep up with the demanding tempo of rigorous training and frequent deployments.

We have made some great improvements in how we track optempo [operations tempo] and readiness in general; we've scaled back our exercise program significantly; and we look very closely at each proposed operation to assess its potential impact on the force. But for now and for the foreseeable future, balancing our operational requirements with overall readiness and quality of life for our people must underlie every thing we do.

Although our readiness to execute our many missions today is our first priority we must also prepare for tomorrow, the third major component of our national security strategy. This past spring we completed the Quadrennial Defense Review, an exhaustive study of the future and the kind of force that we will need in the challenging years to come. The QDR concluded that out to the year 2010, our forces in the field are likely to face a wide range of threats, from terrorists to rogue states equipped with weapons of mass destruction to potent regional powers. By 2020 or so we may even face an emerging peer competitor.

And that means that tomorrow's force must modernize with the best available technology and the best joint doctrine, to give them a decisive edge on any future battlefield. All of this is a very tall order, and as I said, we'll need your help to get the job done.

First and foremost we need the VFW to keep doing what it does best, fighting for our veterans. That's critical to us because our young service members and their family members and friends who represent our potential recruits watch what is happening to retiree and veterans' benefits very carefully. If we want to keep good people in the military today, it is important that our country live up to the commitments made to our veterans, the role models for today's force and tomorrow's.

But there is another area where we need your help.

You are a wise but also an aging breed, and our general population is losing military experience and the wisdom and understanding that comes along with it.

We need you to continue to educate the American people on national security issues.

We need you to continue to speak out about the importance of military preparedness and the importance of a strong military. Many of you were deployed into combat in units that were not as trained and ready as they should have been. You saw the price of not being ready, a price paid in the blood of America's sons and daughters. The VFW has been a wise and influential voice on national security issues for many, many years, and more than ever we need you to beat the drums loudly.

Preparing for the future, to be as ready tomorrow as we are today, will not come easily or cheaply. Today, America spends more on defense in dollars than anyone else, but we rank 44th in the world as a percentage of our GNP [gross national product]! We understand and support a balanced budget, but without increasing the defense budget, we have to find the resources to invest in new technology and new systems to keep our force up to date.

To do that, we have no choice but to realign our defense infrastructure and make our operations more efficient.

Closing excess bases, outsourcing and privatization, streamlining and improving how we do business will be politically difficult -- but as the QDR concluded, there really isn't an alternative. We need the Congress to make the tough decisions, and we'll need your support as we work with legislators and the

American people to build a 21st century military for a 21st century America. With their support we cannot fail; without it, we cannot succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen, the good news is that we are approaching the 21st century from a position of great strength. And we know who got us where we are today. It was you, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who in large part made us what we are in 1998: the world's only remaining superpower and the world's strongest force for peace and stability.

You have left a mighty legacy for your children and grandchildren -- a nation at peace and the opportunity to live in freedom and prosperity. Because of you, we stand on the threshold of a century that promises to be the best America has ever known.

I opened by saying thank you, and I close by saying thank you. Thank you for asking me to be here today, and thank you for what you have done for our country.

May God bless you all.

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